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Secondhand smoke report likely to prompt new restrictions

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Look for cigarette smokers, already feeling like second-class citizens, to get even more pressure to stop their nicotine habits.

A federal Environmental Protection Agency report to be released today officially links secondhand smoke to lung cancer and increased risk of pneumonia and

bronchitis in children. It's expected to generate new restrictions against smoking in public buildings and private workplaces.

"I think it will push cities to evaluate what they ought to be doing," Charlotte Mayor Richard Vinroot said Wednesday.

"It's not stretching it to say that somewhere, sometime, somebody may die because of cancer because

they love basketball or they love restaurants, and they were in danger because too much smoking was going on there," Vinroot said.

He said he may ask the Charlotte City Council to take up the issue in response to the EPA report.

Two years in the making, the report is hotly disputed by the tobacco industry.

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Vinroot

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"The weight of scientific evidence simply does not lead to the conclusion that (secondhand smoke) causes lung cancer in nonsmokers," said a prepared statement from B.T. Reynolds Tobacco Co. of Winston-Salem.

But the report was hailed as a milestone by groups that have fought tobacco interests since the 1964 surgeon general's report first linked smoking with lung cancer.

"Having the EPA's backing is going to carry more weight," said Virginia Popovich, Metrolina

region director of the American Lung Association.

"It is a hammer we can hold over the head of the legislature to get some action," she said.

The group wants N.C. legislators to increase the tobacco tax and to strengthen and enforce its 100-year old law prohibiting cigarette sales to minors.

In 1990, South Carolina passed a law against smoking — except in designated smoking areas — in public schools, day care centers, health-care facilities, public workplaces, elevators and theaters.

North Carolina has no such law. But in recent years, New Hanover and Wake counties have banned smoking in public places, such as sports arenas, shopping malls,

libraries and theaters.

Charlotte follows the state fire-prevention code, allowing the fire marshal to decide where smoking is a hazard.

Still, smoking is limited in some public places. At the Charlotte Coliseum, smoking is banned in the arena but permitted in the corridors. The Charlotte-Mecklenburg Government Center and Charlotte/Douglas International Airport have designated smoking areas. Hospitals are smoke-free.

Smoking policies at Charlotte businesses vary. Because the EPA report connects secondhand smoke with childhood respiratory problems, it also will be used to convince parents not to smoke at home.

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